

## Hurricane Isabel Highlights Need For Preparation, Emergency Notification

Even as Hurricane Isabel churned itself into a monster storm while still in the Caribbean, Virginia's emergency management operation bolted into action, warning Virginia residents to be prepared for the worst once the hurricane made landfall.

On Sept. 16, two days before the storm was to hit the Atlantic Coast near Virginia Beach, the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) staffed by the Virginia Department of Emergency Management (VDEM) began 12-hour shifts to track the storm and target areas that eventually would be evacuated.

As the hours ticked off toward landfall, the EOC, located in an underground bunker at the State Police Academy in Chesterfield County, began to fill with experts covering a variety of disciplines and agencies.

"Representatives from the Virginia Department of Health, Virginia Department of Transportation, the Air National Guard, State Police, Department of Forestry, Department of Fire Programs, the Red Cross, Federal Emergency Management Agency, [U.S. Army] Corps of Engineers and, VDEM were at the center as the storm neared," said Bob Spieldenner, VDEM's information officer.

Central to the EOC's pre-storm efforts was to warn residents about anticipated storm conditions after the hurricane passed. "We were getting information out about what people needed to do to be prepared, that there was still time to get the household's disaster supply kit ready," Mr. Spieldenner said. "We were also trying to let people know they would be without power for several days."

When the storm swept through the state on Sept. 18, Virginia residents "generally heeded the warning" and hunkered down for the battering winds and torrential rain, Mr. Spieldenner said. Initial reports place property damage at over \$741 million "and that figure will go higher," he said.

The storm's aftermath left millions of homes and businesses without electricity, some for more than two weeks. "I don't think anyone was prepared for the widespread devastation that this storm caused," Mr. Spieldenner said.



**Governor Mark R. Warner monitors the progress of Hurricane Isabel in the Emergency Operations Center at State Police Headquarters with other EOC personnel.**

The approaching storm also tested the emergency notification system used to alert state employees about weather-related closings. The Department of Human Resource Management also was monitoring the storm and activities at the EOC.

By early Wednesday afternoon after consulting with a variety of sources on the severity of the approaching weather, Secretary of Administration Sandra D. Bowen sent an e-mail to state employees on behalf of Governor Warner that offices in the Richmond metro area would be closed on Thursday. After the storm hit Thursday afternoon, She announced that offices would be closed in the Richmond area on Friday.

Knowing what to do when an emergency strikes is important. Here are three frequently asked questions about emergency closings.

**Who decides if an agency, college, or university will close?**

- The Governor makes closing decisions about the daytime work hours of administrative agencies in the Richmond Metro Area when emergency conditions affect more than one agency. This area includes Chesterfield, Henrico and Hanover counties and the city of Richmond.
- Agency heads outside the Richmond Metro Area make closing decisions for their agencies.
- All college and university presidents make closing decisions for their institutions.

**How will I know?**

To check on closing information for agencies in the Richmond Metro Area tune in to:

- WRVA radio (1140 AM)
- Local television stations WTVR (6), WRIC (8), and WWBT (12)
- Visit the Department of Human Resource Management's Web site at [www.dhrm.state.va.us](http://www.dhrm.state.va.us)

Employees outside the Richmond Metro area should check with their supervisor or agency human resource director for details about local media announcements.

**How do I know if I'm a "designated" employee?**

The emergency closings policy applies to all classified, restricted and at-will employees. The policy describes "designated" and "non-designated" employees. "Designated" employees are those who are required to work during an official closing because the services they provide are essential to agency operations during emergencies. Agencies and institutions are required to tell employees if they are "designated" or "non-designated." Agencies may designate different employees as essential for different situations.

**Stay Informed**

No matter where you work, you need to stay informed about your agency's procedure for office closings. Your supervisor or human resource office can give you this information and answer questions that often arise during and after an office closing.

*For more information, Policy 1.35, Emergency Closings is posted at*

[www.dhrm.state.va.us/hrpolicy](http://www.dhrm.state.va.us/hrpolicy)

## Capitol Square Renovation Work Progresses To Meet 2007 Deadline

What was once the storehouse of Virginia's history will become home to the Virginia General Assembly and the Governor's office in 2005 as workers race a tight timetable to convert the Old State Library into temporary lodgings for the legislature and Governor as part of a four-year renovation program around Capitol Square.

The former state library, completed in 1940, encompasses eight stories and more than 201,000 square feet of space. The building has been abandoned since the new library opened in 1997.

What is now ringed by a 12-foot-high green fence and covered with scaffolding will eventually become permanent offices for the Governor's staff and cabinet secretaries once the legislature moves back to the Capitol.

Refurbishing the library is one facet of an overall Capitol Square project that will include renovation of the Capitol, renovation of the Finance Building and work on the Washington Building.

In signing legislation authorizing the sale of \$118.5 million in bonds for the renovation work, Governor Mark R. Warner noted that the "four-year project will bring needed safety improvements to some of our state work force, as well as preserve some of our greatest architectural assets."

Work on the exterior of the 200-year-old Capitol will begin next April, marking the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the addition of the House and Senate wings and the 225<sup>th</sup> anniversary of moving the seat of Virginia government from Williamsburg to Richmond.

Following the 2005 session of the General Assembly, interior rehabilitation work will begin. The 2006 session of the General Assembly will be held in the library building, marking only the second time in the building's history that the legislature has not met at the Capitol.



**A crane and scaffolding mark the work being done to renovate the old State Library for use by the General Assembly and Governor's office while the Capitol is refurbished.**

The multiple projects will be on fast-track construction schedules so they can be completed by 2007, the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Jamestown settlement. The commemoration is expected to draw millions of visitors to the Commonwealth.

Sandra D. Bowen, Secretary of Administration, said considerable advance planning has gone into developing the construction schedule. "Doing all this in four years is ambitious, but necessary," she said. "With so many factors converging at the same time – Jamestown 2007, pressing space and security needs, crumbling buildings, a favorable interest rate environment – we do not have a moment to lose in getting this project underway."

Officials estimate that rehabbing the unused buildings could save the Commonwealth nearly \$1.5 million annually in office lease payments.

The Capitol, designed by Thomas Jefferson, will receive extensive renovation work, including electrical, plumbing and other systems and structural work on the rotunda and throughout the building. Valuable artwork and other artifacts will be stored until work is completed. The life-size Houdon statue of George Washington in the rotunda and the immense portrait, *Storming of the Redoubt*, located in the old Senate chamber, will remain in place, securely packaged to prevent damage

while work progresses around them.

The General Assembly's Joint Rules Committee has endorsed recommendations to repair the exterior of the Capitol and to construct an underground addition beneath the South lawn of Capitol Square. The addition would provide needed space for exhibits and interpretation, food service, and media offices among other things. Plans also call for improving parking facilities immediately around the Square to relieve safety and congestion concerns.



**The old State Library when it was new in the early 1940s.**



## New Web Site Allows Online Organ Donation Registration

Donnie Green, a 30-year-old Virginia Commonwealth University employee, not only got a new set of lungs but a second chance at a fulfilling life through the gift of life by an organ donor.

A double-lung transplant in April 2002 offered what Mr. Green termed “a more full life,” allowing him to continue as a lab and research specialist at VCU’s VCURES program.

Mr. Green is one of 544 Virginians last year who received an organ transplant, but more than 2,000 children and adults are on waiting lists hoping to have the same chance at a better life that he enjoys.

They may have a greater chance to receive an organ with the recent launch of a new organ donation registration Web site. Gov. Mark R. Warner last month became the first person to register on the [www.save7lives.org](http://www.save7lives.org) site and he is encouraging all Virginians, and especially state employees, to do the same.



**Donnie Green**

“By launching this site to supplement the Department of Motor Vehicles’ ability to reach out through technology to a new group to sign up for organ donation,” the Governor said.

Gov. Warner has a personal interest in promoting organ donations: His eldest daughter has juvenile diabetes, a condition that could require a pancreatic transplant if no cure is found.

The idea behind the “saving seven lives” slogan is that by becoming an organ and tissue donor, one person can donate a heart, a liver, two kidneys, two lungs and a pancreas. The lives of others can also be enhanced through the donation of eyes and tissue.

In 2000 the General Assembly passed legislation authorizing online organ donor registration. Lifenet, an organ procurement organization based in Virginia Beach assisting with the new Web site, has a goal of signing up 1,000 new donors a month online.

Previously, the only way to become an organ donor was to register through the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) or sign a donor card. According to DMV, more than 715,000 Virginians in 2002 checked “yes” on their driver’s licenses to become an organ donor. Over 1.7 million Virginians are registered as organ donors.

For Mr. Green, waiting to receive a transplant was the toughest time. Born with cystic fibrosis, which causes progressive deterioration of the lungs, he was placed on the waiting list in 1999. His lungs stabilized two years later, but in November 2001, both lungs collapsed. It was five months before he received the transplant that saved his life.

“While waiting, I never worried because I believed that what should happen, would happen,” Mr. Green said. “I wanted to make the best of the time that I might have left.”

Today, he enjoys normal activities like exercise and even mowing the grass. “Receiving the transplant was an amazing experience. There are so many things now to do.”

Long before the DMV or the Internet made organ donation registration simple, 82-year-old Margaret Bowlin, of Colonial Heights, was an advocate for organ donations.

She and her family donated her grandson’s heart, eyes, liver and two kidneys to four separate people after his 1987 death in an accidental shooting.

Mrs. Bowlin, who was associated with 13 governors over her more than 50-years in state service beginning with Governor James Price in 1939, continued to make presentations to doctors and nurses on the benefits of organ donations after her retirement in 1990.

“Please sign up and talk to your relatives to let them know how you feel about organ donation,” she said. “Always advise your next of kin of your wishes and if necessary, explain why.”

Secretary of Health and Human Resources Jane H. Woods urged state employees to sign up online so that “we can say that we have done our part to ensure the circle of life continues for all Virginians.”

## **Paid Leave Possible For Donating Bone Marrow or Organs**

State employees who qualify to be bone marrow or organ donors may be able to take paid leave for up to 30 days during the procedure.

Classified full-time non-probationary employees may use up to 30 work days of paid leave during a calendar year to cover the period medically necessary to donate bone marrow or organs. Exceptions are for employees on disciplinary suspension and some whose positions are contingent on specific project grants.

Some restrictions may apply. Medical certification of the absence to donate bone marrow or organs is required. Leave to donate bone marrow or organ donations will not count against an employee’s 12 weeks of Family and Medical Leave (FMLA). When an employee returns from bone marrow and organ donation leave, he or she will be returned to the position held when the leave began.

For additional information on bone marrow and organ donation leave policies, see *DHRM Policy 4.37, Leave to Donate Bone Marrow or Organs*, located on the Web at [www.dhrm.state.va.us](http://www.dhrm.state.va.us) or contact your agency’s Human Resource office.

## **Flexible Reimbursement Account Open Enrollment Runs Through Nov. 21**

Fall open enrollment for flexible reimbursement accounts (FRAs) will differ from past years in several significant ways.

First, the enrollment period has shifted from the month of November to a 30-day period of Oct. 20 through Nov. 21. Second, eligible employees will enroll for a “short” plan year from Jan. 1 through June 30, 2004. A third change is that FRA participants can contribute as little as \$10 per pay period to set up a medical expense or dependent care account. Previously, the minimum payroll deduction was \$20 per pay period.

In addition to the other changes, the cost of certain over-the-counter antacids, allergy and cold medicines, and pain relievers can be reimbursed under medical reimbursement accounts. Additional information may be found on the Fringe Benefits Management Company Web site at <http://www.fbmc-benefits.com/customers/ofc.pdf>.

Planning for medical expenses will be easier beginning next July 1, when FRAs will take effect at the same time as health benefit changes, beginning each July 1 and ending on June 30 of the next year. As a result, open enrollment for both health benefits and FRAs will be held in the spring every year starting in 2004.

## **CVC Campaign Focuses On Employee Involvement To Help Others**

Virginia state employees are gearing up to lend a helping hand through its participation in the annual Commonwealth of Virginia Campaign, which continues through the end of November. The annual campaign has raised over \$25 million since its inception.

More than 1,000 charities have been given the CVC “stamp of approval.” They vary from health and human service, to environmental and animal protection. New to this year’s CVC are charities that focus on safety and security or historic preservation.

Governor Mark R. Warner serves as the campaign’s Honorary Chairman, who leads by example and has given the campaign his complete vote of confidence. From this level, the CVC has networks of support that span agencies, counties and regions.

The CVC is a team effort and the staff at the Department of Human Resource Management partners with other state agencies to build a strong and inclusive network. This year, the CVC Art Contest was conducted at the Department of Correctional Education.

Students at juvenile correctional centers throughout the Commonwealth competed to recommend a theme and the accompanying art for the 2003 CVC. A student at Paul S. Blandford High School at the Beaumont Juvenile Correctional Center submitted the winning theme of “Lend A Helping Hand.” The CVC Advisory Council judged the theme and its accompanying artwork as the most effective message for this campaign.

One of CVC’s first partners, the Virginia Information Providers Network, worked hard with the CVC to complete a top notch Web site with the capability for charities to submit their applications on line.

The Virginia Department of Transportation is another crucial partner, providing the expertise to produce the annual CVC video. This year’s video features Bill Chambliss, an employee of the State Corporation Commission, who shares his experience with VCU’s Massey Cancer Center.

The campaign is conducted by state employees and continually growing to further meet the needs of its donors. The CVC Advisory Council, led by Sara R. Wilson, Director of the Department of Human Resource Management, is a 24-member board that is tasked with approving all final decisions and requests that are made by the CVC staff, sub-committees and coordinators.

The Advisory Council is a strictly voluntary board that has broad representation from the diverse make-up of our state government. This group continues to provide exemplary support and guidance for the campaign year after year.

Mentoring is another important aspect of the CVC. The campaign “Ambassadors,” led by Wrenn Haley, an employee at the Department of Mental Health, Mental Retardation and Substance Abuse Services, are ready to lend a helping hand when needed.



CVC Ambassadors serve as spokespeople to the campaign and aid other agencies in their campaign endeavors to help increase the overall participation in the campaign.

Two committees that have also worked hard to make the 2003 CVC a success are the communications committee led by Katha Treanor of the State Corporation Commission and the awards committee chaired by Lee Davis from the Department of Corrections.

The communications committee has worked to increase CVC visibility and better inform volunteers of rules and procedures in the campaign. The awards committee re-evaluated the award levels for participation percentage and for dollars raised by state agencies and helped restructure the levels so that more agencies will be able to receive awards for their campaign efforts.

The CVC is also proud of the work and perseverance of each agency's CVC coordinator. The employees serve as the point of contact for each agency's CVC campaign and volunteer so that every state employee may have an opportunity to give to any of the over 1,000 charities accepted into this year's campaign.

To learn more about CVC, visit its Web site at [www.cvc.vipnet.org](http://www.cvc.vipnet.org) or call (804) 225-2212. Without state employees, the CVC family of charities would not be able to provide so many people throughout the Commonwealth of Virginia with the numerous services that help our families, friends and communities.

## Volunteers Form 'Backbone' Of Virginia State Parks System

The great outdoors and volunteerism go hand in hand. Young, old and in between find volunteer work in Virginia's state parks to be invigorating and rewarding.



**False Cape Youth Conservation Corps volunteers erect an osprey nest platform.**

The volunteer program includes a variety of opportunities. Many individuals volunteer their time by simply letting the park staff know of their interest. There are so many different ways to help out that they almost always find a job that matches the talents or preference of a volunteer. Naturally, many jobs are outdoors and involve "getting your hands dirty," but there is indoor work including a variety

of clerical and administrative roles in addition to many guest relations positions.

Many of the parks have groups of volunteers that have officially organized as "Friends of" groups. These groups organize special events, raise money to support the parks, schedule volunteer workdays, and coordinate partnerships with local businesses. They also contact the media and legislature to get the word out on issues important to State Parks. The "Friends" groups work closely with park management to direct volunteer activities effectively.

"Volunteers form the backbone of the state parks system," said Joseph Maroon, Director of the Department of Conservation and Recreation. "Certainly during these difficult budget times, volunteers are really key to some of our activities we would otherwise not be able to undertake."

Johnny and Jo Finch live on Lake Anna and helped establish the non-profit Friends of Lake Anna State Park. As Johnny explains, "We have a great park system, but Virginia ranks last in funding for state parks. Because of this dismal situation, our volunteers focus on supplementing the Lake Anna State Park, both physically and financially. We supplement the park staff physically by organizing work projects to help maintain and operate the park. We supplement the park financially through various fund raising activities. For example, this past year we produced an infusion of \$28,900 that the Park would otherwise not have had."

Volunteers helped Virginia win the National Gold Medal as America's best-managed state park system for 2001-2003. "Without more than 140,000 volunteer hours annually it wouldn't have happened," stated State Parks Operations Chief Nancy Heltman. "That's more than \$2.5 million worth of help." Virginia ranks 50<sup>th</sup> in the country in the per capita support for state parks.

In addition to the "Friends," the Virginia Association For Parks is an organization of key volunteers from state and national park Friends organizations within the state that work together to promote volunteerism, stewardship and advocacy for parks in Virginia.

This organization has become a vocal advocate for state parks with the media and legislature. Their tireless efforts provided a significant contribution in the 69 percent support for passage of the State Parks and Natural Areas 2002 Bond Referendum last November.

Scouting groups, church groups, school classes, and college organizations often volunteer their time to pick up trash and otherwise improve the natural resources of the parks. Many of these groups will coordinate a service project in a park in exchange for camping or a picnic in one of the park's shelters.

Other groups like bike clubs and equestrian groups will dedicate time to improve the trails that they use in the parks. Parks sponsor over fifty special events each year that mobilize civic organizations and other people from the community to showcase the park and local area.

Through the State Parks' campground host program, volunteers come to stay at a park for one to two months and perform a variety of duties while they camp in the park using their own camping equipment. Retired couples from all over the country take advantage of this program.

Camphosts fulfill the role of campground welcomer and serve as eyes and ears for park staff in addition to a variety of duties that are often catered to the talents of the individual volunteers. Sometimes they are fortunate to get experienced plumbers, electricians and carpenters; sometimes the volunteers help out in the visitor center or contact station.

More than 10 colleges and universities currently send students during spring break to work for state parks. Known as alternative spring break, these young people provide valuable assistance in helping park staff get the parks ready for the busy summer season. Alternative Spring Break is a national program that assists a wide variety of government and non-profit organizations with "sweat equity."

Perhaps the most exciting part of the volunteer program in Virginia State Parks is the rebirth of the Virginia State Parks Youth Corps. In the 1970s, state parks operated a



**Volunteers assist with numerous natural resource projects including the removal of non-native invasive species.**

Youth Conservation Corps that was funded by the federal government until funding ended.

In 2000 and 2001 Virginia State Parks began to work on reintroducing the program with youth working at one state park. In 2002 and 2003, the program expanded considerably. The Youth Conservation Corps is an overnight program for youth aged 14-17. The youth live at a state park for three weeks in the summer and perform a variety of natural resource projects including trail work, shoreline cleanups, park beautification and other activities.

One participant's mother commented that her son had been "more responsible and matured especially in his interaction with his family." Another claimed "she sent a boy to the program and a man came home."

In addition to their hard work, the youth are treated to environmental education programs and both in park programs and neighboring area recreational activities. The Youth Service Corps is a day program for at risk youth in the same age range. The division hopes to start a weekend program, the Youth Development Corps, in the spring of 2004.

In 2003, 128 youth participated in programs at eight state parks under the direction of more than 30 supervisors.

Through the generosity of thousands of volunteers each year, Virginia State Parks are better able to provide a quality recreational opportunity to Virginia residents and out-of-state visitors. Volunteers provide needed labor and serve as advocates for the state park system.

For more information on Virginia State Parks, see [www.dcr.state.va.us/parks](http://www.dcr.state.va.us/parks). If you are interested in volunteering, please contact your local park or call Nancy Heltman at (800) 933-7275.

## **DHRM Sponsors Financial Planning Seminars For State Employees**

Over 600 state employees have taken advantage of financial planning seminars to help them with their personal budgeting, investing and learning about how to repair a bad credit rating or save for college.

A half-day seminar will be held Nov. 24 in the Monroe Building. Watch the DHRM Web page – [www.dhrm.state.va.us](http://www.dhrm.state.va.us) - to learn more about registration details.

DHRM is also exploring with other state agencies the possibility of doing videoconferencing of specific topics.

Below is information about two of the most popular seminar topics – budgeting and saving for college.

## **Budgeting Key To Maintaining Good Financial Health**

**By Barbara Kaye**

**Virginia Credit Union**

Financially healthy people come from many different walks of life. They may be obviously “very well off” or just “ordinary folks.” However, they generally have some things in common.

Financially healthy people usually:

- Follow a money management plan
- Save regularly for future needs
- Watch spending
- Pay bills on time
- Use credit wisely
- Maximize resources
- Prepare for retirement

Financially healthy people set financial goals and plan for major expenses and purchases. They often own their own home and have savings built up for emergencies and future needs.

Good financial health has many benefits. Financially healthy people may qualify for lower loan and credit card rates based on their good credit. They’ve built up larger savings balances, which may earn higher returns. Perhaps the most important advantage of good financial health is peace of mind. Should an emergency expense arise, financially healthy people know they can handle it, often with funds from their savings. They also look forward to living comfortably during retirement years.

Financially healthy people maximize their resources. They make sure their savings and investments earn a good rate of return, and they save regularly through automatic savings. They try to avoid unnecessary fees by using free checking or by keeping higher balances and earning interest on their checking account. Financially healthy people pay attention to basic money matters, keeping tabs on their accounts and balancing their checkbook regularly. They use credit sparingly but wisely, taking advantage of offers for favorable rates and terms on loans and credit cards.



Many financially healthy people think of good financial health as a “family affair.” Even if handling the family’s finances is not their usual “household duty,” they know how they are managed. This is especially important in the event of a catastrophic illness or other emergency. Financially healthy people involve family members in setting and prioritizing financial goals, such as buying a new house or preparing for children’s educational needs.

**A money management plan: The first step to good financial health**

A money management plan is important for achieving and maintaining good financial health, but it doesn’t have to be complicated or difficult. Here is one way to develop your own plan:

**Set and prioritize your financial goals**

Decide what is important to you and your family. Set short-term goals, such as a new computer or furniture; medium-term goals, such as a house or car; and long-term goals, such as a comfortable retirement. For some people, short and medium term goals could also include reducing their debt.

**Know how much you earn**

Knowing exactly how much money you have to work with can help you set attainable goals. This is your take-home pay, before savings deductions and other optional deductions.

**List your expenses**

These are either “fixed,” or “variable.” Fixed expenses are specific monthly amounts and may be legal obligations. Examples are mortgage or rent, insurance premiums and loan payments. Variable expenses, like food, utilities, transportation and entertainment are those you can usually find ways to control, such as shopping more economically, limiting the number of times you go out to eat, or carpooling to work.

**Develop a money management plan you feel comfortable following**

Make sure fixed expenses are covered and variable expenses are controlled. Your plan should also include regular savings and debt reduction.

**Look for ways to control variable expenses**

Try keeping a log of all your expenses for a few weeks to get a clear idea of your spending habits. Many are surprised at how much they spend on non-essentials and other impulse purchases.

**Ask for help**

Your credit union is an excellent source for helpful information and straightforward advice on setting and reaching your financial goals. Many financial resources are available at [www.vacu.org](http://www.vacu.org). For personal assistance, call Member Services at (804) 323-6800 or (800) 285-6609, or visit a Virginia Credit Union branch.

**Editor’s note: Barbara Kaye is a marketing specialist at the Virginia Credit Union.**

## College Savings Plans Offer Reduced Rates To State Employees

Commonwealth of Virginia employees who want to save for a student’s future college education can enroll in the state’s three Section 529 college savings options: the Virginia Prepaid Education Program<sup>SM</sup> (VPEP), the Virginia Education Savings Trust<sup>SM</sup> (VEST), and CollegeAmerica<sup>SM</sup>. The Virginia College Savings Plan, the independent state agency created in the mid-1990s to help families save for college, administers all three choices.



VPEP, VEST, and CollegeAmerica can be used at in state and out-of-state colleges and offer significant tax advantages. Section 529 allows tax-free withdrawals for college expenses. Participants in VPEP, VEST, and CollegeAmerica can deduct their entire investment over time from their Virginia taxable income. No other Section 529 plan in the country can offer Virginia state tax benefits.

Commonwealth of Virginia employees can enroll in VPEP and VEST through payroll deduction and save \$60 on a first-time application fee. State employees must attach a Payroll Deduction Authorization form to their VPEP or VEST applications. These forms are available from state agency human resource or payroll offices and by calling VCSP toll free at 1-888-567-0540.

State employees also qualify for reduced fees on their CollegeAmerica accounts. By special agreement with the American Funds, Commonwealth employees can enroll in CollegeAmerica using any financial advisor eligible to sell American Funds. Application forms are available from financial advisors.

For more information call toll free 1-888-567-0540 or visit [www.Virginia529.com](http://www.Virginia529.com).

## **VITA Scores Top National Award For Innovative IT Strategy**

Less than three months after its creation, the Virginia Information Technology Agency (VITA) received national acclaim for its “aggressive and comprehensive reforms of information technology in state government.”

The National Association of State Chief Information Officers (NASCIO) bestowed its 2003 Recognition Award on VITA from among 11 nominations in the State IT Management Initiatives category.

Technology Secretary George C. Newstrom said he was “proud to receive this award that once again recognizes the tremendous efforts that Governor Warner is making in reforming state government. Our efforts not only position the Commonwealth to achieve significant cost savings, but will improve the efficiency of vital services and give taxpayers a better return on their investment.

VITA, formed in July from three state agencies that were abolished and the consolidation of independent information technology divisions within 94 Executive branch agencies, will become state government’s IT “factory” through which agencies will receive IT service and support.

A key component of the restructuring is the amount of savings in tax dollars that will result from the consolidation. Already more than \$600,000 has been saved by consolidating six separate software licenses into one master license.

Long term, VITA is expected to save over \$100 million by both reducing system redundancies and leveraging its buying power. Rather than have 15 different contracts with Dell Computers with 15 different pricing schemes, consolidated procurement will drive costs down while increasing quality and value.

Agency transition to VITA will be phased in over 18 months, with small agencies completed by January, followed by medium-sized agencies next July and the largest agencies in January 2005.

The first agency to transition to VITA was the State Board of Elections earlier this summer. “We were anxious to take advantage of what VITA had to offer,” said Jean Jensen, Secretary of the Board.

“I cannot say enough complimentary things about the positive, cooperative attitude, work ethic, everything involved in the transition,” she continued. “Everything went smoothly because they were super sensitive to our staff and their needs.”

Susan McCleary, Assistant Secretary at the Elections Board, coordinated the transition. “I had expected it to be a real fiasco because the turnaround time was so short,” she said. “But it went much smoother than I anticipated. It was like watching a ballet; everything was so well orchestrated.”

Governor Warner, who initiated the IT consolidation and worked with the General Assembly to create VITA, said the agency will have a long-term impact on Virginia and government operations.

“The creation of VITA and our IT reform efforts give our taxpayers the best value on their dollar and will contribute towards making Virginia more competitive for the kind of economic growth that creates good jobs and a Commonwealth of opportunity for all,” he said.

# Time Growing Short To Take Advantage Of Tax Amnesty Program

By **Kenneth W. Thorson**

The only certainties in life, as Benjamin Franklin once wrote, are death and taxes. Eat right, stay healthy and you might succeed in delaying the former. Miss filing your tax return and you might even put off the latter. But Franklin was right: Both are inevitable, and now more so than ever.

Virginia is about to get tough with tax delinquents. Some 400,000 individuals and businesses owe \$180 million in collectible back taxes. During a climate of fiscal belt-tightening, having that money in the state's accounts receivable column puts a considerable strain on the public pocketbook. This pot of back taxes seems a logical potential source of much-needed tax revenue. So, the Department of Taxation is preparing an all-out assault on delinquent taxpayers.

But not just yet. Virginia's tax delinquents first have one last chance to pay up – tax amnesty. This nine-week program, ending Nov. 3, gives taxpayers an opportunity to wipe the slate clean by paying off what they owe. Tax amnesty waives all penalties on the taxes due and cuts the accrued interest in half – providing that the tax bill and remaining interest are paid during the amnesty period. The program provides a compelling incentive for late or nonfilers to make good on what they owe, so much so that we anticipate amnesty will generate a total of \$48 million in revenue.

Yet there are those who raise legitimate questions about tax amnesty as a matter of public policy, me included. Is making these concessions to tax delinquents, when the rest of us dutifully pay our taxes on time, a fair solution to our budgetary predicament? Does amnesty create a risky precedent, planting in some taxpayers the notion that if they do not pay now, they need only wait until the next amnesty rolls around?

These are valid issues, but they must be taken within a broader context. Governing is never a matter of absolutes, but a continual push and tug of competing points of view. Only when we take a step back to contemplate the overall objective are we able to make judgments that help move us toward our larger goal. In the case of tax amnesty, the revenues that the program generates will benefit all Virginians and help alleviate severe budget challenges. In short, the larger good in this case clearly outweighs what some might perceive as inequitable treatment.

## Tax Amnesty

### Information

#### Web site

[www.vataxamnesty.com](http://www.vataxamnesty.com)

#### Toll-free information

1-877- 828-2977

(1-877-VATAX77)

#### Hours of operation:

**Monday – Thursday**

**8:30 a.m. – 8 p.m.**

**Friday**

**8:30 a.m. – 4:30 p.m.**

**Saturday**

**8:30 a.m. – 12:30 p.m.**



For some of our fellow citizens, meeting their tax obligations can present a trying decision. Having to choose between daily needs and tax bills can put families in a hole. Amnesty recognizes that there are times when paying taxes can be especially challenging, but that this inability to pay should not create an undue burden that compounds itself over time. Tax amnesty provides a chance to get out from under the black cloud once and for all.

Virginia is not alone in turning to tax amnesty to accelerate tax collections. States as diverse as New York and Kentucky have implemented amnesty, and five others have programs scheduled this fall. In Missouri, amnesty was so well received that lawmakers have made it an annual initiative.

The commonwealth's first amnesty in 1990 collected \$32 million. Tax delinquents should not assume, however, that amnesty will be back any time soon. If history is a guide, Virginia has shown an infrequent appetite for amnesty. Eligible taxpayers would be prudent to take advantage of this year's program.

We have made participating in tax amnesty simple and straightforward. Detailed bills have been sent to hundreds of thousands of taxpayers. Toll-free phone lines have been established for questions and credit-card payments. A new Web site allows taxpayers to access personal tax information, get details about amnesty and make payments through our innovative, secure QuickPay options. Taxpayers who cannot afford to pay off their tax bills completely during the program may arrange a payment plan.

Short of loaning citizens the cash to foot their tax bills, there is little more the department can do to ease the vexation that often comes with paying taxes.

While we are doing all we can to encourage eligible taxpayers to take part in amnesty, once the program expires, our efforts will be all the more aggressive in seeing that taxpayers pay what they owe. The department's enforcement capabilities have been dramatically enhanced. In addition to adding more than 115 employees – auditors, collectors and customer service representatives – so that we can more effectively pursue tax delinquents, we have implemented sophisticated technology designed to increase our collection capacity. We will seize IRS refunds, issue liens, garnish wages, seize bank accounts and file felony warrants against fraudulent filers.

Then there are the penalties. Delinquent taxpayers who let amnesty pass without paying or arranging a payment plan are facing a 20 percent penalty – on top of existing penalties and interest. If they do not pay, the interest clock begins ticking again, and a bad situation can get much worse very quickly.

Tax amnesty is not a free ride. It is designed with the fervent hope that individuals and businesses that have gone through a rough patch can emerge on the other side with a clean slate and join the ranks of regular taxpayers. But to do so they must meet the obligations we all share as citizens. If not, then this much is certain – they will be hearing from us after Nov. 4.

**Kenneth W. Thorson is Virginia's Tax Commissioner**

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